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NEWS RELEASE

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Gem County Reports Idaho's First West Nile Virus Activity in 2007

West Nile virus was found in mosquitoes from Gem County, prompting health officials to remind people to 'Fight the Bite' of mosquitoes when they are outdoors and around their homes. Last year, West Nile virus was discovered in 38 Idaho counties, infecting approximately 1,000 people and contributing to the deaths of 23 people. This is the first indication of WNV in Idaho for 2007. So far this year, six other states have reported West Nile activity according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

West Nile virus is usually spread through the bite of an infected mosquito. West Nile virus does not generally spread from person-to-person or from infected animals to people. "Idaho led the nation in West Nile infections last year," says Dr. Leslie Tengelsen, Deputy State Epidemiologist. "We know from our experience that West Nile infection can cause serious illness, especially in people over the age of 50. This is a warning for people to protect themselves from the bite of mosquitoes."

To protect themselves, people are advised to avoid mosquitoes when they are most active, between dusk and dawn. People also should:

- Cover up exposed skin when outdoors and apply DEET or other EPA-approved insect repellent to exposed skin and clothing. Follow instructions on the product label, especially for children;
- Insect-proof their homes by repairing or replacing screens; and
- Reduce standing water on their property that provides mosquito breeding habitat, such as bird baths and decorative ponds.

West Nile virus does not usually affect most animals, including dogs and cats, but can cause severe illness in horses and certain species of birds. Although there is not a vaccine available for people, there are several vaccines available for horses. People are advised to contact their veterinarian about vaccinating their horses.

Certain birds adversely affected by West Nile virus include magpies, crows, raptors, ravens and jays. They frequently die from West Nile infections. The Idaho Department of Fish and Game will continue testing and documenting dead birds this season. People who find dead birds to are asked to call their local Fish and Game office. Fish and Game is most interested in testing birds that have been dead for less than 48-hours.

With warmer weather, people are spending more time outdoors doing yard work or taking part in outdoor recreation opportunities. Tengelsen advises people to take precautions now. “West Nile virus is part of our ecosystem and we can all do our part to reduce mosquito habitat around our homes by reducing standing water,” she says. “By doing that and taking personal protective measures to avoid mosquito bites, we can fight the bite and enjoy the great Idaho outdoors.”

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(Editors: For more information please contact Tom Shanahan, 334-0668, or your District Health Department Public Information Officer.)